

“TRUE FELICITY”: PARADISE IN THE THOUGHT OF AVICENNA AND MAIMONIDES

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Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī, a tenth-century man of letters, lived in the center of cultural activity in Baghdād, and recorded that activity in several of his works. His book entitled “On Entertainment and Conviviality” is a detailed account of the conversations, debates and discussions that took place in the intellectual *salon* held at the house of the Buwayhid *wazīr* Ibn Sa’dān. Among the poets, scientists, theologians and philosophers of various trends and religions who frequented this *salon* was al-Tawḥīdī’s teacher, the philosopher Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī, known as “the Logician” (*al-manṭiqī*). In one of his accounts, al-Tawḥīdī says:

Abū Sulaymān (al-Sijistānī) told us: A certain Christian described to us paradise, saying: “There is no eating or drinking in it, nor copulating.” One of the (Muslim) theologians (*mutakallimūn*) heard it and said: “What you describe is but sadness, sorrow and misery.”¹

The Christian who is the target of criticism in this anecdote participated in an interreligious debate, and hence was probably an “intellectual,” but his position reflects what is supposed to have been the general Christian position on the hereafter. In al-Tawḥīdī’s account, the conversation then turns in another direction. This short reference to the subject, however, hits the core of the problem of paradise for philosophers in the medieval Arabic-speaking world. The Muslim philosopher Abū Sulaymān himself is likely to have identified with the Christian more than with the Muslim theologian, as did probably also his student al-Tawḥīdī. The criticism directed at the Christian in this anecdote is the very one that Muslim theologians and Muslim orthodoxy directed at philosophers.

For Muslim orthodoxy, the philosophical understanding of the hereafter was one of the many aspects of what they believed to be the philosophers’ profoundly irreligious attitude. Although the philosophers strongly insisted on their belief in the hereafter, their paradise seemed to be very different from both the Quranic paradise and the various shades of the orthodox perception

¹ *Al-Imtāʿ waʾl-muʿānasa*, ed. Aḥmad Amīn and Aḥmad al-Zayn (Beirut, n.d.), III, p. 192.

of paradise. Consequently, orthodox Muslim theologians accused the philosophers of reading of the Quranic passages concerning paradise in a way which, like their understanding of God's attributes, stripped those passages of their original meaning and rendered the concept of paradise meaningless.

The orthodox Muslim view of the philosophers' paradise is reflected even in modern scholarship. Thus, in a list of the alternatives offered in religious history to the description of afterlife as a garden, the philosophers' paradise is described as "some sort of disembodied unity with something else which virtually amounts to no afterlife at all."² In fact, such a skeptical attitude as to the sincerity of the philosophers' belief in the reality of paradise does not do justice to the intensity of their commitment to the notion of the hereafter. For some of these philosophers, the afterlife was very real, and they were preoccupied with it and with paradise as they understood it, perhaps even more than other thinkers in the Islamic world, whose eschatology sometimes centered on other issues.

One illustration of this claim may suffice: the eighth-century al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, a key figure in the development of Islamic thought, is recorded as saying that, were it not for the hope of the beatific vision of God in the hereafter, the heart of the believers would break from sorrow.³ But despite this hope, sorrow and anguish seem to have been the dominant feature of Ḥasan's religious attitude. He is said to have walked all his life bent and forlorn, as if hell had been created for his sake alone.⁴ This is a topical description:⁵ Ascetic, moody behavior was apparently part and parcel of the behavior of early Islamic theologians. And thus, in the consciousness of the early theologians and pietists, hell seems to have taken a more prominent place than paradise. The philosophers, on the other hand, focused on the search for human perfection and for the ultimate felicity. It is towards this goal that they turned in their intellectual endeavor. Their identification of the ultimate felicity with paradise gave paradise the paramount importance which, paradoxically, it did not have in the thought of main-stream pietists.

In order to present a full, accurate picture of this intricate problem, one would have to unfold the many faceted attitudes to the hereafter in the medieval Islamic world and its background in Antiquity. In the following pages I shall try to concentrate on a few aspects of medieval Arabic philos-

² A.K. Reinhart, "The Here and the Hereafter in Islamic Religious Thought," in S.S. Blair and J.M. Bloom, eds., *Images of Paradise in Islamic Art* (Hanover, N.H., 1991), pp. 15-23, esp. p. 15.

³ Cf. L. Massignon, *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane* (Paris, 1954), 185.

⁴ See, for example, Ibn Qutayba, *Uyūn al-akhbār* (Cairo, 1928), pp. 351; 355:17-356:2.

⁵ The same is said about 'Amr b. 'Ubayd, one of the two founders of the Mu'tazila. 'Amr's colleague and co-founder of the Mu'tazila, Wāṣil b. 'Aṭā', was a close disciple of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī.

ophy that can give us a glimpse into the ways in which medieval philosophers of the Islamic world handled their philosophic and religious heritage on this subject. I will try to present their interpretation of the notion of paradise, and to show that, within the boundaries of their common philosophical outlook, their differing religious traditions dictated different nuances of attitude.

Before starting, however, a clarification of terms is in order.

1. In the medieval Arabic-speaking world, "philosophy" (*falsafa*, or its equivalent, "wisdom" [*hikma*]) sometimes served as a general term for the intellectual endeavor and the quest for wisdom. In this sense, it was used to denote various schools and methods, and could include mystics and theologians. *Falsafa* was even used to denote the general pretension of a human being to understand anything in this world.⁶ But the word *falsafa* was also used to designate a rather specific school of thought, which drew heavily upon the Aristotelian and Neoplatonic philosophical tradition of the Alexandrian Academy. It is in this last narrow sense that I will be using the term "philosophy" here.

2. Between the ninth and the twelfth centuries, Arabic was the language that dominated the cultural activity of a vast area, stretching from the Indian subcontinent in the east to the Iberian peninsula in the west. In the case of philosophy, the common linguistic medium also reflects a common intellectual agenda. In this sense, we can speak of an "Arabic philosophy" that includes Muslim, Jewish and Christian writers.⁷ Although the matter needs further investigation, I would venture to suggest that in the context of the problem that concerns us here, i.e., the attitude to the hereafter, Christian Arab philosophers seem to stand apart, not because they did not share the same ideas as their Jewish and Muslim counterparts, but because they do not seem to have encountered the same kind of difficulties with their own religious tradition and within their own religious community. From the writings of the Christian Arab philosophers one gets the impression that a belief in a spiritual, non-corporeal retribution in the hereafter was shared by all educated Christians, or, at least, was not perceived as a heresy.⁸ Hence, the

⁶ Thus a Jewish anti-Christian treatise, "The Account of the Disputation of the Priest," renders the word "wisdom" in Psalm 146:3-5 as "*falsafa*," see D.J. Lasker and S. Stroumsa, *The Polemic of Nestor the Priest: Qissat Mujadilat al-Uṣṣuf and Sefer Nestor ha-Komer* (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1996), vol. I, p. 80, and vol. II, p. 82.

⁷ Several scholars prefer the term "Islamic Philosophy," which has the advantage of covering also the vast body of Muslim philosophy written in Persian; see, for example, Seyyed Hossein Nasr's Introduction to O. Leaman and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *History of Islamic Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996). This advantage is irrelevant for Christian and Jewish medieval philosophy, which is predominantly written in Arabic, and is also less significant for Muslim philosophy in the period that concerns us here, up to Avicenna's time.

⁸ It is worth noting that "concrete" conceptions of afterlife and of the end of days in early

following pages will be concerned mostly with Jewish and Muslim philosophers who wrote in Arabic.

3. In the religious traditions that have their roots in the Bible, Judaism, Islam and Christianity, the term "paradise" may indicate either the Adamic garden of Eden or the abode of the righteous in the hereafter. Although the significance of the Paridisiac *Urzeit* for the medieval Arab philosophers deserves further studies, the following pages will phocus on their understanding of paradise as *Endzeit*.

A. The Muslim Religious Background

As in the case of the problem of Divine anthropomorphism, the attitude of Muslim philosophers to paradise was determined by the sacred texts.⁹ First and foremost among these is the Qur'ān, in which the notion of paradise plays a crucial role. Throughout the Qur'ān, and particularly in *sūras* pertaining to the Meccan period, the notion of Divine retribution is of paramount importance. Muḥammad saw himself as a warning messenger, sent to a people who had no previous messenger. The warning he had to deliver concerned the imminent Last Hour (*al-sā'a*), with the resurrection of the dead and the ensuing judgement (*yaum al-dīn*). The outcome of the Judgement would be eternal punishment for the wicked and eternal bliss for the righteous, both of which are depicted in the Qur'ān in vivid colors.

Paradise, the eternal abode of the Righteous, is called in the Qur'ān "the garden" (*al-janna*), the same word which is used to describe the biblical garden of Eden, the garden in which Adam lived before his fall.¹⁰ The phonetic rendering of the Biblical Eden (*jannāt 'adn*) is used by the Qur'ān only as a term for the delights of the hereafter, and not as a name for the original abode of Adam.¹¹ The hereafter is also described as "the gardens of bliss" (*jannāt al-na'īm*) or simply "the bliss" (*al-na'īm*). The Qur'ān describes paradise in sensuous, material terms, and dwells in detail on the garden's pleasures or delights.¹²

Christian literature are considered by the Fathers (Irenaeus for instance) to betray Judaizing "corporeal" influences. This tallies with the common depiction of Rabbinic Judaism as Anthropomorphic, a depiction that was inherited by both Muslims and Karaites.

⁹ For the medieval Muslim theologians, the question of anthropomorphism was linked to the interpretation of paradise not only because it called for similar exegetical approaches, but more specifically, because of the question of the beatific vision of God in paradise. This question, couched mainly in the exegesis of Q. 75:22-3, deserves a separate study. For a summary of the various theological positions on this question, see D. Gimaret, s.v. "*Ru'yat Allāh*," *EI*², vol. VIII, p. 649.

¹⁰ Cf. Q. 2:35; 7:19-27.

¹¹ E.g. Q. 9:72; 13:23; 16:31.

¹² E.g. Q. 3:198; 8:27-28; 13:22-23; 35; 36:54-59; 37:40-48; 38:49-54; 43:68-73; 44:51-57; 47:15; 52:17-28; 55:48-78; 56:10-40; 76:11-22; 78:31-35.

The other major component of the Muslim canon is the body of prophetic traditions (*ḥadīths*). The *ḥadīth* literature expounds on the Quranic descriptions of paradise and adds to them still more colorful, more sensuous descriptions.¹³ These traditions, which are said to be transmitted uninterruptedly from the prophet, are considered by Muslims to be the binding interpretation of the Qurʾān, provided that the tradition is established as authentic and sound. But because of the proliferation of contradicting and spurious traditions (both phenomena recognized already by classical Muslim scholarship), it was easier for Muslim intellectuals to find a way around them, whereas the text of the Qurʾān could not be ignored.

The Quranic descriptions of paradise have drawn criticism from members of other religions, and have also been the target of scathing mockery by the freethinkers of Islam. A Christian polemicist who names himself ‘Abd al-Masiḥ al-Kindī, thus points out that the honey which the righteous drink in paradise is bound to make them sick, and that the fineries which they wear are fit for the uncouth Bedouin taste. Al-Kindī claims that the Arabs had seen these luxuries in the Sassanian court and coveted them, and that Muḥammad had introduced descriptions of the luxuries into the Qurʾān in order to encourage the Bedouins to fight in his cause.¹⁴ A notorious ninth-century Muslim freethinker, Ibn al-Rāwandī, ridicules the same verses. The Quranic rivers of paradise flow milk, honey, and ginger; but milk, says Ibn al-Rāwandī, is the kind of food that only the starved person would desire, whereas honey and ginger are only condiments, and should not be eaten by themselves. The brocade which the Qurʾān promises for the righteous in paradise is, according to Ibn al-Rāwandī, of the coarse kind, suitable for drapery rather than for clothes. Any person imagining himself in paradise, wearing such coarse garments and drinking milk and ginger, would resemble the brides of the barbarian Kurds and Nabateans.¹⁵

This kind of mockery forced all rationalist thinkers of Islam to interpret the Quranic passages, but their interpretation varied according to their particular

¹³ See, for example, Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 4, pp. 240-245 (*Bāb ṣifāt al-janna wa’l-nār*); Dārimī, *Sunan*, vol. 2, pp. 239-245 (*Kitāb al-raḥā’iq*).

¹⁴ See G. Tartar, *Dialogue islamo-chrétien sous le calife al-Ma’moun (813-834): Les épîtres d’al-Hashimī et d’al-Kindī* (Paris, 1985), p. 199. For al-Kindī, the description of paradise is thus part of the (common) Christian argument, that the spread of Islam was due to material reasons and does not prove the compelling truth of its content; see S. Stroumsa, “The Signs of Prophecy: The Emergence and Early Development of a Theme in Arabic Theological Literature,” *Harvard Theological Review* 78 (1985), pp. 101-114.

¹⁵ Ibn al-Rāwandī, quoted by Ibn al-Jawzī; see ‘Abd al-Amir al-A’sam, *Ta’rikh Ibn al-Riwandī al-mulḥid; nuṣūṣ wa-wathā’iq min al-maṣādir al-‘arabiyya khilāl alf ‘am* (= *History of Ibn al-Riwandī The Heretic* [Beirut, 1975]), p. 163. For the Muslim freethinker, the descriptions of paradise serve to show the absurdity of the text, and thus to refute the very notion of revelation; see S. Stroumsa, “The Blinding, Emerald: Ibn al-Rāwandī’s *Kitāb al-Ẓumurrud*,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 114.2 (1994), pp. 163-185.

trend of thought. While some endeavored to preserve the literal meaning of the text, or at least to keep close to it, the philosophers opted for a radical interpretation that denied any physical aspect to the pleasures of paradise.¹⁶

B. *The Philosophers' Hereafter*

Indeed, as in the case of verses that offer anthropomorphic descriptions of God, the corporeal Quranic paradise was not something the philosophers could accept. When the *falāsifa* speak of the hereafter, they consider it to be the culmination of human perfection. According to all *falāsifa* the human being is composed of body and soul. Following Platonic teaching, they see the soul as including vegetal and animal souls or parts, and a rational part. The body perishes with death, regardless of a person's behavior or understanding. With the disintegration of the body, the vegetal and animal souls, which depend for their existence on the bodily organs, also perish. The rational soul or the intellect can, however, hope for survival, independently of the body.

Whereas the Quranic description promises eternal bliss to all believers, regardless of their intellectual level, the philosophers tend to tie the reward to the individual's intellectual achievements. They consider the intellect to be the real "form" of the human being, that by which it deserves being called human. The material body is necessary for the activation of the human potential, but in itself this body is insignificant and disappears with death. Only the realization of human potentiality allows a person to survive beyond death. This realization occurs when a person reaches during his lifetime understanding of the "separate forms" or "separate intellects" which do not reside in Matter. When a human being contemplates these separate intellects and apprehends them, he is united with them, and that part of him which grasped the eternal separate entities, his intellect, becomes itself eternal. The object of contemplation is in particular the Active Intellect, which governs the sublunar world. The unification or conjunction with the Active Intellect is the closest a human being can aspire to get to the realm of the divine. For the *falāsifa*, therefore, the conjunction with the Active Intellect is the foremost goal of human beings: it is the completion of human perfection, and it alone guarantees immortality and eternal reward. According to most of the *falāsifa*, in this conjunction the souls conjoin also with each other and lose their individuality.

When speaking of the higher levels awaiting the perfect souls, the *falāsifa*

¹⁶ On the various interpretation of paradise in Islam, see L. Gardet, s.v. "*Djanna*," *EI*², vol. II, pp. 447-450.

almost invariably speak of "felicity" (*sa'āda*) rather than of "pleasure" (*ladhdha*). Although derivatives of the word "felicity" do appear in the Qur'ān to distinguish the lot of the inhabitants of paradise,¹⁷ it is not the one commonly used in the Qur'ān or in orthodox parlance. It is, on the other hand, the term favored by the philosophers. Technically, this preference is explained by the fact that the term translates the Greek *eudaimonia*. But the persistence of the philosophical preference may have something to do with the particular philosophical connotations of the term "pleasure."

The philosophers (and in particular Abū Bakr al-Rāzī)¹⁸ understood the term *ladhdha* as denoting not only the sensual and corporeal quality of pleasure but also its transient character. It is the pleasure associated with the removal of deficiency of some sort, a pleasure which is felt only in comparison to this previous deficiency and which fades away as the established equilibrium becomes a norm and the memory of the poignant craving fades away. Thus the pleasure of eating is felt only in comparison to the pangs of hunger which precede it. When a person has eaten his fill the idea of eating loses its appeal, and it is no longer pleasurable. The insistence of the Qur'ān that the pleasures of the hereafter are somehow different, and that they preserve their joy forever without the need for a comparison with its opposite, did not erase the semantic value of this term. The term inherited from the philosophical tradition, on the other hand, (*sa'āda*, *eudaimonia*) is not tainted in this way, and could thus be more easily used to describe the static, unchanging bliss of the hereafter: the pleasure which is achieved from the apprehension of unchanging intelligibles, from *becoming* unchanging intelligibles. This may have contributed to the philosophers' preference for the term "felicity."

This brief, schematic (and therefore necessarily inaccurate) description of the philosophical view now needs to be examined in detail. What exactly did the Arabic-speaking philosophers mean by "conjunction with the Active Intellect" and how did they relate it to the Quranic paradise? Did they sincerely believe in the possibility of conjunction, or was it only a lip-service to the religious environment in which they lived? And what did they allot the non-intellectual Justs, to whom the Qur'ān promised eternal bliss?

These and similar questions need to be addressed separately in the examination of each thinker. The answers of each philosopher would vary according to his temperament and personal philosophical inclination. No generalization can faithfully reflect the differences between the more strictly Aristotelian

¹⁷ See Q. 11:107; and see also verse 105 of the same sūra.

¹⁸ See his *Kitāb al-ladhdha*, in P. Kraus, ed., *Rasā'il Abī Bakr al-Rāzī*; and L. Goodman, "The Epicurean Ethic of Muḥammad ibn Zakariyā' ar-Rāzī," *Studia Islamica* 34 (1971), pp. 5-26, esp. pp. 9-10.

philosophers, like al-Fārābī (d. ca. 952) and Ibn Rushd (d. 1298), and between Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037), who shows more Neoplatonic sensitivities, or the more mystically inclined Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 1185). Similarly, the answers given to these questions by an avowed Jewish Aristotelian like Maimonides (d. 1204) would surely differ from those of an outright Neoplatonist like Ibn Gabirol (d. 1057). An attempt at generalizing is further complicated by the fact that not all the philosophers who discussed the hereafter in philosophical terms also took the trouble to show how their philosophical views relate to the religious understanding of this issue. Even al-Fārābī, who consciously and systematically used religious terminology for his philosophical theories, especially in his political theories, did not make an attempt to identify his hereafter with the Quranic paradise. Such an attempt does appear, as early as the tenth century, in the writings of Neoplatonic philosophers like al-Sijistānī and in the *Epistles* of the Sincere Brethren.¹⁹ But their association with the Ismāʿīliyya puts them in a separate category. Similarly, the first Jewish Aristotelian, Ibn Dāwūd (d. ca. 1180), does not deal specifically with the question of paradise in his discussion of the reward and punishment.

I have therefore chosen to focus here on Avicenna and Maimonides, who represent, among Muslim and Jewish thinkers respectively, the first explicit and sustained attempts to translate the religious traditions on paradise into philosophical language.²⁰

C. Avicenna

Avicenna is considered by some to be “the first Arabic-speaking philosopher to have produced a truly complete, coherent philosophical system.”²¹ Within this system, Avicenna adopts the model described above concerning the fate of the soul, with its blend of Aristotelian and Neoplatonic elements, and refines it.²² Whereas his understanding of the soul and its immortality has

¹⁹ Cf. for instance, *Rasāʾil ihwān al-yafāʾ*, vol. 1, pp. 331-346 (the ninth Epistle); vol. 3., pp. 287-320 (the thirty eighth epistle); *Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī's Kitāb al-Yanābīʿ*, in H. Corbin, ed. and trans., *Trilogie ismaélienne* (Tehran and Paris, 1961), pp. 67-70 (text, *yanbūʿ* 28-29), pp. 88-92 (translation); P.E. Walker, *The Wellsprings of Wisdom: A Study of Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī's Kitāb al-Yanābīʿ* (Salt Lake City, 1994), pp. 89-91.

²⁰ On the pioneer role of Maimonides and Avicenna in applying the philosophical, Farabian theory of the relationship between philosophy and religion to a particular religious tradition, see L.V. Berman, “Maimonides, the disciple of Alfarabi,” *Israel Oriental Studies* 4 (1974), p. 155 and note 5; and see Law, “Avicenna and his Theory of the Soul,” p. 176.

²¹ E.g. Goichon, *La philosophie d'Avicenne*, p. 12; see also Law, “Avicenna and his Theory of the Soul,” p. 179.

²² On Avicenna's theory of the immortality of the soul, see, for instance, Gardet, *La pensée religieuse d'Avicenne*, pp. 88-94; Blumberg, “The Problem of Immortality;” Law, “Avicenna and his Theory of the Soul;” Schwarz, “Avicenna and Maimonides on Immortality;” G. Verbeke, “L'immortalité de l'âme dans le ‘De Anima’ d'Avicenn,” *Pensamiento* 25 (1969), pp. 271-290.

been amply studied by scholars, relatively little attention has been given to the close connection of this understanding to Avicenna's reading of the Qur'ān. In order to see this connection, we need to repeat briefly the main characteristics of Avicenna's theory. In his *Epistle Concerning the Healing from the Fear of Death*, he explains:

Death is nothing but the soul's abandoning the use of its tools—which are the organs whose assembly is called “a body” just as the craftsman abandons his tools. The soul is a non-corporeal substance . . . and when this substance leaves the body, it achieves the eternal survival (*baqā'*) which is its property. It is purified of the turbidity of nature, and it enjoys perfect felicity (*sa'āda*), which cannot be exhausted or annihilated.²³

In his repeated attempts to explain “the Soul's Felicity and Misery After Death,” Avicenna says:

You should know that, as regards the hereafter, there is a part which is received from the revealed law, and can be established only through revelation; this is what pertains to the body after the Resurrection. . . . But there is a part which can be apprehended by the intellect and through a logical proof, and which has been confirmed by revelation; this is (the part which relates to) the utmost felicity and misery which concern the souls. Human comprehension, however, falls short of grasping it . . .

The Divine philosophers desire to attain this felicity more than they desire the corporeal felicity. In fact, they seem oblivious to the latter, and they do not deem it as anything of importance compared to that felicity which is close to the First Truth.²⁴

Avicenna then lays down the principles for a correct understanding of the question of reward and retribution. These principles include the fact that every faculty has its own pleasure, which is the attainment of perfection proper for this faculty; that these pleasures vary in rank, and that the pleasure of the cognitive faculty is of a higher rank than, for example, that of the nutritive faculty; and that the lack of perfection of the faculty can cause immense misery.

Having established these principles, Avicenna continues:

The perfection proper to the rational soul is that the soul becomes an intellectual world, wherein is depicted the form of All, the rational order of All, and the good that emanates in All, beginning from the Origin of All, proceeding to the noble, absolutely spiritual substances which are the origin of the soul, then, through the spiritual beings which have some connection to the bodies, and through the heavenly bodies in their arrangement and their faculties. The rational soul proceeds in this way, until it completes in itself

²³ *Jāmi' al-badā'i'*, p. 37 (= Mehren, *Traité*, p. 50; French translation in Mehren, *Traité*, pp. 29-32 [“Traité sur la délivrance de la crainte de la mort”], esp. pp. 28-29).

²⁴ *Aḥwāl al-nafs*, pp. 126-127; see also *Najāt*, pp. 477-478.

the arrangement of the whole being, and it is turned into an intellectured world, corresponding to all the existent world. The soul then observes that which is absolute beauty and absolute good, it is unified with it and is imprinted in its resemblance and arrangement, engraved in its ways and becomes part of its substance.²⁵

According to Avicenna, this state is comparable to nothing we know from our worldly experience, from which it differs in both its permanence, the difficulty to achieve it, and the pleasure which accompanies it:

For how can we relate the sensual pleasure, or the animal pleasure, or the (pleasure of the) irascible one, to this felicity and pleasure? However, while we are in this world of ours and in this body of ours, and while we are submerged in vices, we do not feel this felicity even if some of its causes happen to us . . . and therefore we do not ask for it, and we do not yearn for it . . .

But then, when we are separated from the body . . . if the rational faculty of the soul has reached a degree of perfection which enables it, having been separated from the body, to accomplish the complete perfection which it is capable of achieving, . . . this pleasure is in no way of the kind of the sensual or animal pleasure. Rather, it is a pleasure which resembles the good state of the pure living substances, which is loftier and nobler than any pleasure.²⁶

Avicenna tries to illustrate our difficulty to grasp and depict this pleasure, saying:

In this respect we are like a eunuch, who does not crave the pleasure of sexual intercourse nor does he desire it, because he has never experienced it and does not know what it is, although both induction and widespread sayings inform him of its existence and indicate to him that sexual intercourse entails pleasure. This is our situation regarding the pleasure of whose existence we know but which we cannot conceive.²⁷

This inability holds true for all human beings. But philosophers and prophets, who have perfected their rational faculty, have some notion of what awaits them and they long for it, whereas the multitudes are totally ignorant of this possibility:

²⁵ *Aḥwāl al-naḥs*, pp. 130-131; *Najāt*, pp. 480-481. Note that Avicenna, who chooses his words with care, avoids the term "conjunction."

²⁶ E.g. *Najāt*, pp. 482-484.

²⁷ *Al-Mabda' wa'l-ma'ād*, p. 112. According to Gutas, *Avicenna*, pp. 98-99, this monograph marks a transition period in Avicenna's literary activity, after which he began to strike a largely independent course from the transmitted Aristotelian tradition. See also *Iṣārāt, al-namaḥ al-thāmin* (Mehren, p. 4); and *Najāt*, p. 479, where Avicenna lists the eunuch together with the blind and deaf, as examples of people who cannot apprehend certain pleasures; Cf. Michot, "Eschatologie," p. 243.

Know that just as young boys are insensitive to the pleasures and pains proper to adults, and they poke fun at them, and find pleasure in that which in reality is not pleasing and which mature people distaste, so are the young of intellect—mundane people and those attached to the body—in the eyes of those of mature intellect, who are the ones freed from Matter.²⁸

The difficulty to grasp spiritual pleasure is reflected also in the difficulty to convey it in words. Avicenna makes repeated attempts to give his reader an idea of the spiritual bliss, and he often resorts to the usage of parables and similes. Thus, for example, in his attempt to convince us of the superiority of spiritual pleasures, he evokes the case of the chess player, who prefers the joy of winning to the pleasures of food and love-making. In the same context he also reminds us that people will often shun physical pleasures, out of fear that they should procure them reproach and shame (*hišma*).²⁹ Avicenna also employs metaphoric language of the kind that is usually qualified as mystical. Typical to Avicenna is the frequent use of the notion of love (*'iṣq*) which he elaborates in order to describe the soul's longing for this pleasure and the happiness that is associated with it.³⁰

Avicenna accepts the view that the rational faculty which has comprehended the intelligibles and has acquired the habit of contemplating the active intellect is imperishable and, generally speaking, he identifies this state with the Quranic paradise.

Among the *falāsifa*, Avicenna stands out in his poetic sensitivity, which is reflected in his own poetic compositions, the philosophical stories, as well as in his exegetical discussions.³¹ Avicenna is also undoubtedly, among the *falāsifa*, the earliest to have attempted a systematic, explicit explanation of the Quranic hereafter. He wrote a commentary on several Quranic chapters,³² and he dedicated a separate treatise to the meaning of the prophetic imagery. In this treatise, entitled *On the Proof of Prophecies and the Interpretation of the Prophets'*

²⁸ *Al-Mabda' wa'l-ma'ad*, p. 114.

²⁹ *Iṣārāt, al-namaṭ al-thāmin* (Mehren, p. 1); compare below, *apud* note 74.

³⁰ See, for instance, his *risāla fī'l-'iṣq*, in Mehren; see also *Iṣārāt, al-namaṭ al-thāmin* (Mehren, pp. 8-9). The elaboration of this and similar terms in the *risālat al-Fuṣūṣ* attributed to al-Fārābī adds to the doubts concerning this ascription, and agrees with the manuscript evidence that it was written by Avicenna. See *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥasan Al Yāsīn (Baghdad, n.d.), p. 69 (*faṣṣ* 27), and see Sh. Pines, "Ibn ṣīnā et l'auteur de la *Risālat al-fuṣūṣ fī'l-ḥikma*: Quelques données du problème," *Revue des études islamiques* 19 (1951), pp. 121-124 (reprinted in *The Collected Works of Shlomo Pines*, Vol. III, *Studies in the History of Arabic Philosophy* [Jerusalem, 1996], pp. 297-300), and the bibliography there. It should, however, be noted that the term *'iṣq* also plays an important role in the thought of *Iḥwān al-ṣafā'*, who dedicated to it the thirty-seventh of their epistles (vol. 3, pp. 269-286, esp. pp. 280-283), and, of course, in Sufism; see, for example, A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, 1975), p. 137.

³¹ See Law, "Avicenna and his Theory of the Soul," p. 176; S. Stroumsa, "Avicenna's Philosophical Stories: Aristotle's *Poetics* Reinterpreted," *Arabica* 39 (1992), pp. 183-206.

³² See *Jāmi' al-badā'i'*, pp. 24-32. On Avicenna's exegesis, see Gardet, *La pensée religieuse d'Avicenne*, pp. 139-141.

Symbols and Metaphors, Avicenna explains the prophetic language as a means of teaching philosophical truth to people who are not philosophers. The language of the Qur'ān thus served the Prophet Muḥammad "to bring knowledge to the uncouth nomads" as well as to the whole of human race.³³ In this context Avicenna turns to explain the verse concerning the razor-sharp path that leads to hell,³⁴ and he says:

You will first be required to know what "punishment" and "reward" are, and what is meant by "paradise" and "hell." I say: The reward is to dwell eternally in divine providence, completely exempt from the need to toil for unattainable things in (both) the practical and the cognitive realm. This is only achieved after attaining perfection in the realm of knowledge and after shunning the vices in the realm of the practical, so that the vices do not become a habit and a positive disposition for which the soul longs as one longs for intimate things, making it impossible to endure their absence patiently.³⁵

I say: Inasmuch as there are three worlds: a world of the senses, an imaginative, estimative world and an intellectual world, the intellectual world is where rest is. This is paradise . . .

Now you should know that the intellect, in its apprehension of most universals, must deduce them from particulars, which inevitably depend on external sense-perception. You know that it proceeds from the external sense-perception, to the estimation and cogitation.³⁶ Now this belongs to what is a narrow and difficult road and "a path on the way to hell" . . . If a person transcends this stage, he reaches the world of the intellect. If he stops at that stage, mistaking the estimation for the intellect . . . then he remains in hell.³⁷

Paradise, or "the place of (eternal) dwelling" is, according to Avicenna, the intellectual world, whereas the imaginative and estimative world, that of the senses, is the world of corruption and of the graves.³⁸ The body and its pleasures are thus excluded from Avicenna's paradise.

Such an interpretation in itself is rather daring, and was considered by the Muslim orthodoxy to be simply heretical. This orthodox reaction is

³³ "On the Proof of Prophecies," p. 116 (with minor changes, the translation is the one offered by M. Marmura, cf. *Fī ihbāt al-nubuwwāt*, p. 85). See also Gardet, *La pensée religieuse d'Avicenne*, p. 202.

³⁴ Q. 37:33; see, for example, al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ* (Leiden), vol. 4, pp. 245-247 (*bāb al-sirāt jīr jahannam*); and cf. Wensinck, *Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane* (Leiden, 1944), vol. III, p. 300.

³⁵ *Fī ihbāt al-nubuwwāt*, p. 88 (cf. "On the Proof of Prophecies," p. 119).

³⁶ Imagination (*khayāl*) abstracts the form from matter, but still conceives of it in material terms: measure, quality, etc. . . . Estimation or cogitation (*wahm*), a somewhat higher degree, applies non-material judgments to the material experience. Both of these degrees are related to the material world, and are thus lower than the pure abstraction of universals. On these terms in Avicenna's psychology, see Goichon, *La philosophie d'Avicenne*, p. 31.

³⁷ *Fī ihbāt al-nubuwwāt*, p. 89 (= "On the Proof of Prophecies," pp. 119-120).

³⁸ *Fī ihbāt al-nubuwwāt*, p. 89 (= "On the Proof of Prophecies," p. 120).

exemplified by Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), whose *Intentions of the Philosophers*, in which he summarized the philosophical positions, was based on the model of Avicenna. In his critique of the philosophers, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, al-Ghazālī says:

We say: most of these things (which the philosophers say) do not contradict religion. For we (i.e., orthodox Muslims) do not deny that in the hereafter there are kinds of pleasures which are greater than the *sensibilia*, nor do we deny the immortality of the soul after death . . . What does, however, contradict religion among the things they say is the denial of bodily resurrection, the denial of corporeal pleasures in paradise and bodily sufferings in hell, and the denial of the existence of paradise and Hell as described in the Qurʾān.³⁹

Avicenna's very notion that the Quranic verses describing the pleasures of paradise can be interpreted allegorically is thus seen by al-Ghazālī as heretical. When we examine more closely the details of the Avicennian reward, the audacity of his interpretation of the Quranic paradise becomes even more striking.

According to Avicenna, the degree of spiritual bliss in the hereafter is proportionate to the intellectual and moral preparation of the individual.⁴⁰ In this regard, we can distinguish three main groups of souls:

1. The evil souls who willfully refused the intellectual and moral good in this life will remain attached to the corporeal world after death. Because of the lack of the bodily organs required to achieve their desires, the lot of these souls will be eternal frustration and agony. They will remain forever longing for the soul's bodily activity of acquiring the things by which it realized its essence, at a time when none of the instruments for such an acquisition exists.⁴¹ Avicenna further illustrates this frustration by recalling a (popular?) saying: "Never fall in love with a traveller, for he will inevitably travel or die. You will then be left in the anguish of love, tortured."⁴² The frustrated infatuation of the soul with the fickle pleasures of the body are punishment enough. But in addition to this Avicenna says that the celestial bodies will reflect and magnify the soul's desires, and intensify its agony over the loss of the worldly pleasures.⁴³

2. The souls who have intended no evil in this world, but have not reached intellectual perfection, will be rewarded according to their merits. These souls cannot apprehend abstract knowledge, and therefore will be granted pleasures of the imaginative faculty. Since these pleasures require some material

³⁹ *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*, ed. M. Bouyges (Beirut, 1927), p. 354.

⁴⁰ Blumberg, "The Problem of Immortality," p. 83; *Šifā'*, p. 642; Gardet, pp. 101-104.

⁴¹ *Fī ithbāt al-nubuwwāt*, p. 89 (= "On the Proof of Prophecies," p. 119); *Najāṭ*, p. 488.

⁴² *Fī ithbāt al-nubuwwāt*, p. 89 (= "On the Proof of Prophecies," p. 119).

⁴³ Blumberg, "The Problem of Immortality," pp. 84-85; *Najāṭ*, pp. 489; *Aḥwāl al-naṣf*, p. 139.

foothold, as it were, this material substrate will be provided by the celestial bodies. According to Avicenna, such souls “imagine all the other-worldly things in which they had believed, and the tools which enable them to imagine anything are the celestial bodies. The souls thus see everything which was recounted in this world about the state beyond the grave, the resurrection and the other-worldly goods.”⁴⁴ In other words, through the use of the imagination the soul of the non-intellectual justs will indeed be rewarded, as promised by the Qur’ān.

3. The hallowed souls (*al-anfus al-qudsīya*) are the souls of true philosophers and prophets. Theirs are the souls who have reached perfection, and their reward is the contemplative bliss of knowledge. This bliss is not attached to any bodily substrate; it is perfectly spiritual, and cannot be described by images and similes.⁴⁵

It thus seems that the Quranic imagery is irrelevant for this last group, the true philosophers and the prophets. The prophets are the ones who speak in similitudes, who inform people “through symbols and similitudes derived from things that for them are majestic and great” and who “tell them about eternal bliss and misery in parables they can comprehend and conceive . . . and that there are pleasures that are great possessions.”⁴⁶ But these similitudes made by the prophets are not intended for prophets. For the same reason, when the Prophet Muḥammad describes the pleasures of the hereafter, he describes the pleasures for which other people can aspire, not the pleasures which await people of his own noble kind. For the prophet knows that “the true nature of the afterlife” is not to be spoken of: that is something “no eye has seen and no ear has heard.”⁴⁷ Thus, when Avicenna says that the Qur’ān speaks in images, he refers to the group of the righteous but intellectually imperfect people, who need the reassurance of palpable reward and will grasp nothing abstract. But when the philosophers and prophets attain the perfect bliss, they reach a degree of perfection which is even beyond the Quranic imagery.

This daring analysis is not presented by Avicenna as a rejection of the Qur’ān but on the contrary, as the correct interpretation of the words of the Qur’ān itself. In another treatise of his, entitled *Concerning the Souls’ Ranks in Felicity and Misery after the Separation from the Body*, Avicenna says:

Know that the human soul falls necessarily into one of three categories: for it is either perfect in knowledge and in deed, or imperfect in both of them,

⁴⁴ *Aḥwāl al-naḥs*, p. 139; see also *Isārāt, al-namaṭ al-thāmin* (Mehren, p. 7).

⁴⁵ *Aḥwāl al-naḥs*, pp. 139-140.

⁴⁶ Healing: *Metaphysics* X, p. 101.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*; and see below, note 50.

or perfect in one and imperfect in the other . . . In this initial division, the souls are of three kinds, as it is said in the Qur'ān: "You shall be three bands: Companions of the Right (O Companions of the Right!); Companions of the Left (O Companions of the Left)."⁴⁸ And it said: "And the foremost in the race, the foremost in the race, those are they brought nigh the throne."⁴⁹

We say: Those who are perfect in knowledge and deed are the ones who are foremost in the race. To them belongs the furthestmost degree in the Gardens of Bliss. Of the three worlds, they achieve the world of the intelligibles. They derive enjoyment from comparing the filth of the (earthly) bodies with the souls of the celestial bodies and their sublime might. These are the ones who are foremost in the race, who are of the uppermost rank.

The Companions of the Right, who are the middle rank, are elevated above the world of corruption. They conjoin with the souls of the celestial bodies, and they are purified of the filth of the elemental world. They witness the bliss which God, the Exalted, has created in the heavens, such as the Huris, various kinds of delectable food, and melodies of birds which humans would fail to describe or explain. It is as the Prophet, peace be on him, had said, recounting the words of his Lord: "I have prepared for my righteous servants that which no eye had ever seen and no ear has ever heard, nor had it occurred to a human heart."⁵⁰ This is the rank of the middle people. But it is not impossible that their state will progress until they are elevated to attain the uppermost rank, and will be submerged in the real pleasures, reaching the formermost people after the passing of ages.

And this is the rank of the Companions of the Left, who are the ones who are sunk to the lowest rank: They are submerged in the seas of natural darknesses, they fall into the abyss of the elemental bodies, and they suffer the calamities of hell.⁵¹ These are the ones who "bewail today not one, but many destructions."⁵²

This is the explanation of the state of human spirits after their separation from the bodies and the departure to the hereafter. Divine revelation and philosophical opinion agree on its soundness, as we have explained.⁵³

By couching his view in an exegetical framework Avicenna attempts (as he often does) to reconcile the philosophical view with the religious one. In his outline of the hereafter he includes the physical pleasures of paradise as described by the Qur'ān and the *ḥadīth*: the untainted, wide-eyed eternal virgins (the Huris), the food and the melodies. But he also states that this is only for "the middle rank."

⁴⁸ Q. 56:8.

⁴⁹ Q. 56:9-10.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Dārimī, *Sunan*, vol. 2, p. 241 (*Kūlāb al-raḡā'iq* 105); Wensinck, vol. IV, p. 451.

⁵¹ *Dār al-bawār*, the Qur'ānic Hell. Literally: "the abode of perdition."

⁵² Q. 25:13-14.

⁵³ Ibn Sīnā, *Risāla fī ma'rīfat al-naḡs al-nāḡa wa-aḡwālīhā*, in: *Aḡwāl al-naḡs*, pp. 187ff.

The subtle differentiation which Avicenna makes in the ranks of people in the hereafter is supported by the terminology he chooses. When he explains the Quranic verses about the hereafter, Avicenna usually sticks to Quranic terminology. He employs the terms "paradise" or "garden" or "garden of bliss" and describes its delights. But when he speaks of the higher levels awaiting the perfect souls, he almost invariably switches to speak of "felicity" (*sa'āda*), the term preferred by the philosophers. It should be noted, however, that Avicenna refuses to dispense with the term "pleasure." Although he is aware of the definition of pleasure as "returning to the natural state," he specifically rejects it and offers instead another definition: "Pleasure is to attain that which is compatible." Accordingly, Avicenna says;

For the rational soul, that which is compatible is the intellection of the Pure Good and the beings that are generated from it, in the order which makes each one of them emanate from the True One and intellect His essence. Thus, the rational soul's attainment of this perfection is its pleasure.⁵⁴

We must now come back to the appreciation of Avicenna's paradise. If the Quranic description of paradise is unsuitable for the state of the philosopher, could we claim that Avicenna did not really believe in paradise, and that his use of words like "felicity," let alone "pleasure," does not reflect his innermost beliefs? As far as I can see, such a claim would be erroneous. Despite the fact that the similes of the Qur'ān are identified by Avicenna only with the lot of the "middle rank," it seems that he indeed associated the rank of the philosophers and prophets with the notion of actual felicity, and did not see it as a mirthless abstract state. In his *Book of Pointers and Admonitions* (*Kitāb al-iṣārāt wa'l-tanbīhāt*) Avicenna says, in what sounds like a response to the Muslim theologian in al-Tawḥīdī's story quoted above:

We must not heed those who say: If what we achieve (at the end) amounts to a state in which we neither eat nor drink nor copulate, what felicity is there for us? If someone speaks thus, he should be enlightened and he should be told: You wretched fellow, perhaps the state of the angels and what is above them is more pleasurable and joyful than the state of cattle!⁵⁵

The intensity of Avicenna's attachment to the notion of felicity at the highest degree can also be gauged from the fact that, unlike most Arabic speaking philosophers, Avicenna did not regard the state of the philosophers in the

⁵⁴ *Al-Mabda' wa'l-ma'ād*, pp. 110-11; see also *Iṣārāt, al-namaṭ al-thāmin* (Mehren, pp. 2-3). Schwarz ("Avicenna and Maimonides on Immortality," pp. 189-191) rightly links Avicenna's use of the term "pleasure" with his view that the soul is a spiritual substance which retains the imaginative faculty after death. It seems to me, however, that Avicenna adopted this view as a result of his commitment to the Quranic "pleasure" rather than the other way round.

⁵⁵ *Iṣārāt, al-namaṭ al-thāmin* (Mehren, p. 2); and see above, *apud* note 1.

hereafter as a communal experience. Avicenna stands out among the *falāsifa* in his insistence that the souls retain their individuality even at the highest rank of immortality:

In the very disposition of the substance of the soul which comes into existence together with a certain body . . . there is a natural yearning to occupy itself with that body, to use it, control it, and be attracted by it. This yearning binds the soul specially to this body, and turns it away from other bodies distinct from it. . . . The soul achieves its first entelechy through the body: its subsequent development, however, does not depend on the body but on its own nature. But after their separation from their bodies the souls remain individual owing to the different matters in which they had been.⁵⁶

As several scholars have pointed out, this peculiar Avicennian doctrine of individual immortality reflects Avicenna's Muslim religiosity.⁵⁷ As a Muslim, he was committed to prove not only the immortality of the soul but also the survival of its individuality, since this is the basis of reward and punishment in the afterlife.⁵⁸ This doctrine also gives credence to Avicenna's words concerning the experience of the perfect soul in the hereafter. Although one cannot speak of the "sentiments" of the souls, it still seems that Avicenna believed the life of these souls to be connected with intense pleasure, which alone can be described as true felicity.

D. Maimonides

Unlike their Muslim contemporaries, the Jewish Medieval philosophers did not have to contend with a sacred text that offers plastic, corporeal description of the afterlife. In fact, as both Muslim and Christian polemicists repeatedly reminded their Jewish interlocutors, the Hebrew Bible hardly discusses the soul's survival and the hereafter.⁵⁹ One could thus expect the problems that faced Jewish philosophers to be much simpler than those facing their Muslim counterparts. But already the Talmud contains corporeal descriptions of the hereafter (although these are usually restrained): the souls of the righteous

⁵⁶ *Najāt*, pp. 301-302 (= F. Rahman, *Avicenna's Psychology* [London, 1952], pp. 57-58).

⁵⁷ See Goodman, *Avicenna*, p. 163. This peculiar Avicennian doctrine is rightly described by Endress as "a philosophical metaphor of the Islamic faith;" see Endress, "The Circle of al-Kindī," pp. 43-83, esp. p. 74; Gardet, *La pensée religieuse d'Avicenne*, pp. 91-92. According to Pines, this doctrine may have constituted an important part of Avicenna's "oriental philosophy," and of his disagreement with the Christian philosophers of Baghdad; see Pines, "La 'philosophie orientale'," esp. pp. 14-15; and see also Law, "Avicenna and his Theory of the Soul," p. 183.

⁵⁸ Goichon, *La philosophie d'Avicenne*, p. 48.

⁵⁹ See, for example, Sa'adya, *Amānāt*, p. 264; Ibn Kammūna, *Tanqīh al-abhāth fī'l-mīlāl al-thalāth*, ed. M. Perlmann, p. 40; Avraham ibn Dā'ud, *Sefer Emmunah Ramma* (Frankfurt, 1852; reprinted Jerusalem, 1967), p. 39.

are kept under the Divine Throne, the righteous sit under canopies and enjoy the splendor of the Divine Presence (*shekhina*).⁶⁰ Rabbinic tradition identifies paradise (*gan eden*) as the abode of the Righteous, as opposed to hell (*gehinnom*), the abode of the wicked,⁶¹ but the Rabbis often refer to the hereafter with another term: "the world to come." In later Midrashic literature, the notions of the garden of Eden, the days of the Messiah, the world to come and the resurrection of the dead blend together, and are all given colorful, often corporeal descriptions.⁶² The association of the final reward with the resurrection of the dead contributed to the tendency among Jews to hold a physical, material image of a bodily reward in paradise. It seems that although Jewish polemicists ridiculed Muslim perceptions of the hereafter, these perceptions had a profound impact on Jewish contemporary beliefs. Thus, despite the apparent lack of scriptural constraints, a philosopher like Maimonides had to contend with popular views which were much the same as those with which Avicenna struggled. Thus, when Maimonides records the beliefs of those Jews who identify reward with the garden of Eden, he attributes to them a belief in what sounds like a Quranic paradise:

A place where people eat and drink without bodily toil or faintness. Houses of costly stones are there, couches of silk and rivers flowing with wine and perfumed oils.⁶³

The corporeal image of paradise was not restricted to the uneducated multitudes, but was also held by the elite of the Jewish community. Maimonides quotes a saying of the Sages, which, according to his understanding, denies physical pleasures in the hereafter: "In the world to come there will be no eating nor drinking, but only the righteous sitting with crowns on their heads enjoying the splendor of the Divine presence." According to him it is evident from this saying that there is no corporeality in paradise, since there is no eating and drinking.⁶⁴ But years later we still find Maimonides's toughest rival, the Gaon (i.e. head of the Academy) Samuel ben Eli, interpreting the same Talmudic saying in a very different way: The righteous sit on chairs, they have crowns, hence they must have bodies.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ BT, *Baba Batra* 75.

⁶¹ See BT, *Hagiga* 15a; *Baba Batra* 15a.

⁶² See, for example, Rabbi Joshua ben Levi's description of paradise, *Yalqut Shim'oni* on Genesis, and see E.E. Urbach, *The Sages, their concepts and beliefs* (Jerusalem, 1975), p. 276.

⁶³ *Introduction to Heleq*, p. 196; Abelson's translation, p. 29.

⁶⁴ *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Teshuva* VIII:2.

⁶⁵ The Gaon's *Epistle on Resurrection*, written in Arabic, is apparently lost, but Zvi Langermann is preparing an edition of the medieval Hebrew translation of this text. The arguments of the Gaon are quoted and refuted by Maimonides' student, see S. Stroumsa, *Yosef ben Shime'on's Silencing Epistle*, (Jerusalem, Ben Zvi Institute, forthcoming), Commentary on #20 and #137. On this debate, see S. Stroumsa, "Twelfth Century Concepts of Soul and Body: The Maimonidean Controversy in Baghdad," in A. Baumgarten *et al.*, eds., *Self Soul and Body in Religious Experience* (Studies in the History of Religion; Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

Maimonides discusses the hereafter in both his halakhic and philosophical writings. His most detailed discussion of the Jewish tradition in this respect is found in his *Commentary on the Mishna*, in his *Introduction to Tractate Heleq*. The subject matter of the discussion is

The felicity (*sa'āda*) which human beings attain from the performance of those precepts which God enjoined upon us by the hand of Moses.⁶⁶

Maimonides has a very clear notion of this felicity:

the final goal is the attaining to the world to come, and it is to it that the effort must be directed.⁶⁷

Before introducing his own concept of the hereafter, however, Maimonides feels obliged to disentangle the concept of the world to come from the three other, supposedly related concepts of *gan eden*, the days of the Messiah and the resurrection of the dead. He first turns to define paradise:

As for the garden of Eden, it is a fertile spot on the earth's sphere, rich in streams and fruits. God will of a certainty disclose it to man one day, and will show him the path leading to it. Man will reap enjoyment within it, and there may possibly be found therein plants of a very extraordinary sort, great in usefulness and rich in pleasure-giving properties, in addition to those which are renowned with us. All this is not impossible nor far-fetched. On the contrary, it is quite near possibility, and would be so even if the Torah failed to allude to it. How much more it is the case seeing that it has a clear and conspicuous place in the Torah.⁶⁸

Maimonides demythologizes the term *gan eden*, the Adamic garden of Eden, which, following Rabbinic tradition, is often identified with the eternal reward in paradise. As Maimonides curtly explains, the garden of Eden, although as yet unidentified by geographers, is an earthly place. It is the place where Adam had lived, its location may one day be disclosed to us, when God finds us worthy of it, but it is not identical with the hereafter.⁶⁹

As we have seen, since the Qur'ān used the same word (or words) for both the Adamic Eden and the hereafter, the interpretative approach which distinguishes between the two was less easily accessible to Muslims. But even within the Jewish tradition Maimonides' approach stands out in its boldness.

⁶⁶ *Introduction to Heleq*, p. 196; compare Abelson's translation, p. 132.

⁶⁷ Abelson, p. 44.

⁶⁸ Abelson, p. 41.

⁶⁹ Of course, one would then have to ask what is the exact meaning of "the place where Adam had lived" for Maimonides, and how concrete can we take this place to be. See S. Klein Braslavy, *Maimonides' Interpretation of the Adam Stories in Genesis: A Study of Maimonides' Anthropology* (Jerusalem, 1986 [in Hebrew]), esp. pp. 251-253. On closer scrutiny, Adam's original abode may well turn out to have a lot in common with the hereafter. For Maimonides, they both represent the ideal of intellectual humanity, the one in the form of what we could have been, the other in the form of what we can become.

As mentioned above, the Rabbis often identified the garden of Eden with the ultimate reward, as did also some Medieval Jewish theologians prior to Maimonides, for instance al-Muqammaṣ and, with some reserve, Sa'adya.⁷⁰ By adopting his approach, Maimonides can eliminate a major component of the corporeal imagery of paradise, namely its association with lush gardens. Maimonides is thus able to claim that the Jewish tradition never intended to identify the hereafter as paradise.

Maimonides then applies the same demythologizing approach to the Messianic times, which he describes as a specific historical period, albeit set in the future. It is a wondrous period, devoid of the troubles and toils of "regular" history, but a historical period nonetheless.⁷¹

The theme of the resurrection of the dead is treated by Maimonides as a Pandora box, not to be opened. He accepts this belief as belonging to the basic Jewish creed, but refuses to discuss it any further (until forced to do so by popular uproar). Even here the demythologizing approach is at work, to the best of Maimonides's ability. Although he cannot interpret this principle away, he limits it to the Messianic period, and insists that the resurrection is not for eternity: those risen from the dead will die again.⁷²

This three-step demythologizing leaves the concept of the world to come as unrelated to the other concepts. It is not the garden of Eden, nor is it

⁷⁰ The ninth-century Dāwūd al-Muqammaṣ, who was probably influenced by eastern Christian exegetes, says explicitly: "Paradise is the place where Adam was physically living and from which he was then driven out, and it is the abode of the just in the world to come;" see S. Stroumsa, *Dāwūd ibn Marwān al-Muqammis's 'Ishrūn Maqāla* (Etudes sur le judaïsme médiéval 13, Leiden, 1989), p. 300. Sa'adya says that "the abode of the reward is called *gan eden*, because in this world no place is nobler than that orchard, which God had made Adam's dwelling." (*Amānāt*, p. 274) This seems to mean that the garden of Eden was an earthly place, and its name was borrowed to describe the Hereafter, although the two are not necessarily identical.

⁷¹ Abelson, pp. 42-44.

⁷² Abelson, p. 42. Again, as in the case of *gan eden* (above, note 69), Maimonides's apparent dismissal of the issue raises more questions than it answers. Since his own days, Maimonides has repeatedly been accused of denying the actual resurrection of the dead and of treating it as a parable. Although he firmly denied this accusation, some of his pronouncements seem to confirm it. In the *Guide*, for instance, Maimonides never deals expressly with the resurrection, but *Guide* I 42, discussing the meaning of the word "living," is clearly related to our subject. In the course of this chapter Maimonides mentions the resurrection of a boy by Elisha (I Kings 17:17), which he interprets as the resuscitation of a very sick child. He then cites TB *Berakhot* 8:2 ("The righteous are called living even when they are dead"), a saying which seems to refer to the resurrection, but is cited in this chapter in proximity to "the traditional interpretation" of Deut. 22:7. In Maimonides's understanding, the traditional interpretation of this last verse connects it to the world to come. (cf. *Hilkhot Teshuva* X: 1; Introduction to *Heleg*, p. 205: "That it may be well with thee"—in a world that is all good; 'and that you may live long'—in a world that is everlasting, which is the world to come;" see *Tosefta Hulin* X). It thus seems that whatever it was that Maimonides understood by the resurrection of the dead, it may not have been that far from his understanding of the world to come. I am indebted to Menachem Kahana for discussing this problem with me.

identical with the Messianic time or the resurrection. It is not related to the earthly historico-mythical bliss, either past or future,⁷³ and it is not related to bodily reward. Maimonides can resort to this analysis because, unlike the Qur'ān, the Hebrew Bible does not identify the garden of Eden with the hereafter. As mentioned above, neither does the Rabbinic tradition oblige him to identify the two, because of its frequent usage of the term "the world to come." Throughout his Arabic discussion of this question in the *Introduction to Tractate Heleq*, Maimonides uses the Hebrew terminology of the various aspects of paradise. By an analysis of the Hebrew terms Maimonides disengages the world to come (*ha-'olam ha-ba*) from the other three concepts, and by disengaging the world to come, he can move on to the philosophical, Arabic, notion of reward. In other words, it is his participation in both worlds, that of Hebrew and that of Arabic culture, that allows him a certain freedom of manoeuvre between his religious and his philosophical traditions.

When Maimonides finally returns to "his original intention" of explaining the meaning of the ultimate felicity, he is no longer focused on the Jewish tradition, and he sounds remarkably close to Avicenna:

Know that just as a blind man can form no idea of colours, nor a deaf man comprehend sounds, nor a eunuch feel the desire for sexual intercourse, so the bodies cannot comprehend the delights of the soul . . . Indeed, we have no pleasure in any way except what is bodily, and what the senses can comprehend of eating, drinking, and sexual intercourse. Whatever is outside these is non-existent to us. . . . For we live in a material world and the only pleasure we can comprehend must be material. But the delights of the spirit are everlasting and uninterrupted . . . When after death the worthy from among us will reach that exalted stage he will experience no bodily pleasure, neither will he have any wish for them, any more than would a king of sovereign power wish to divest himself of his imperial sway and return to his boyhood's games with a ball in the street, although at one time he would without any doubt have set a higher worth upon a game with a ball than on kingly dominion . . ., just as we to-day rank the delights of the body above those of the soul.

. . . And when you will give your consideration to the subject of these two pleasures, you will discover the meanness of the one and the high worth of the other. . . . Similarly, many a man prefers the obtaining of revenge over his enemies to many of the pleasures of the body. And many a man, again, shuns the greatest among all physical delights out of fear that it should bring him shame and reproach (*hišma*) of men.⁷⁴

⁷³ See also *Hilkhot Teshuvu* VIII:2, where Maimonides says that the world to come is not for the future, but rather it exists now: "It was called 'The world to come' only because a person reaches this (future) life after the life in this world of ours, where we live in both body and soul, and which universally precedes (the other life)."

⁷⁴ *Introduction to Heleq*, p. 204; Abelson, p. 38; and see above, *apud* note 29.

Maimonides accompanies his argument with illustrations which we have seen used by Avicenna: the eunuch or the blind man, the little boy who does not understand the adults' pleasure, the person who prefers winning to material delights and poverty to shame. On the basis of these passages Dov Schwarz has argued convincingly that "the relevant passages from Avicenna's *Kitāb al-Najāt* were known to Maimonides, either in their original form or in paraphrase, and that Maimonides shaped his doctrine of the intellect's or soul's experience in the afterlife in accordance with Avicenna."⁷⁵ We have seen above the close interplay between the philosophic and religious components in Avicenna's thought. Maimonides, who inherits this interplay, had, of course, no commitment to the Muslim tradition. But Avicenna's way of handling the subject of paradise probably set for Maimonides the example of how to negotiate his way between philosophy and his own religious tradition.

Maimonides writes on a double linguistic and textual register. On the one hand he has to interpret the Jewish texts, as understood by the Jewish tradition. But on the other hand, he often writes in Arabic, and even when he writes in Hebrew, his philosophical frame of reference is that of Arabic philosophy. He can thus move from one language to the other, and give both tradition and philosophy their due.

In the most philosophical of his writings, the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides speaks little of the otherworldly paradise, and for more detailed discussions he refers the reader to his halakhic writings. What he does say, however, is highly significant.

To begin with, The *Guide* confirms Maimonides's care to distinguish between *gan eden* and paradise in the sense of the hereafter. In his lengthy discussion of Adam's fall Maimonides is careful to use the first, Hebrew concept. But in *Guide* II 27, in the context of the question of the creation or pre-eternity, of the world, he refers to the popular understanding of the hereafter, and there he uses the Arabic term:

The same applies to the souls of the virtuous; for according to our opinion, they are created, but will never become non-existent. According to certain opinions of those who follow the literal sense of the Midrashim, their bodies will also be in a state of perpetual felicity (*mun'ama*) for ever and ever—an opinion resembling that of those whose belief as to the inhabitants of paradise (*al-janna*) is generally known.⁷⁶

As could be expected, the *Guide* also confirms Maimonides' firm denial of a corporeal pleasure in the hereafter. But more than the halakhic writings,

⁷⁵ Schwarz, "Avicenna and Maimonides on immortality," p. 188. I am indebted to Amira Eran for drawing my attention to the similarity between Avicenna and Maimonides, as well as to Schwarz's article.

⁷⁶ *Guide* II 27 (*Dalāla*, p. 233; Pines, p. 333).

the *Guide* gives us a glimpse of a positive description of Maimonides's understanding of paradise.

Towards the end of the *Guide*, in what he calls "a kind of a conclusion" Maimonides turns to offer the reader a guide to the highest way of worship. This guide, he says, "makes known to him (i.e., the reader) how providence watches over him in this habitation, until he is brought over to *the bundle of life*."⁷⁷ This last expression, taken from Abigail's words to David (I Sam 25:29) is interpreted in the Jewish tradition since the Talmud as referring to the world to come. Maimonides himself interprets this idiom in this way, in his aforementioned *Introduction to Tractate Heleq*. And indeed, it is in this chapter 51 that Maimonides speaks most clearly of the lot of the perfect souls, at death and beyond it.

The philosophers have already explained that the bodily faculties impede in youth the attainment of most of the moral virtues, and all the more that of pure thought, which is achieved through the perfection of the intelligibles that lead to passionate love of Him, may He be exalted.

... when a perfect man is stricken with years and approaches death, this apprehension increases very powerfully, joy over this apprehension and a great love for the object of apprehension become stronger, until the soul is separated from the body at that moment in this state of pleasure.

... The Sages ... followed the generally accepted poetical way of expression that call the apprehension that is achieved in a state of intense and passionate love for Him, may He be exalted, a kiss.

... After having reached this condition of enduring permanence, that intellect remains in one and the same state, ... And he will remain permanently in that state of intense pleasure.⁷⁸

The individuals who have achieved the highest intellectual apprehension experience, in their death and beyond it, great joy and permanent intense pleasure. In this, Maimonides, like the other *falāsifa*, identifies the highest degree of the hereafter with the intellectual, non-corporeal bliss.

Like most *falāsifa*, Maimonides did not think of the bliss in the hereafter in terms of individual survival: he did not endorse Avicenna's personal immortality, and his express rejection of this theory developed by "a modern philosopher" may be a directed specifically against Avicenna.⁷⁹ He also disagrees with Avicenna concerning the possibility of continuous improvement of the soul after death: Whereas Avicenna, as mentioned above, left room for the elevation of the middle-rank soul to the highest rank,⁸⁰ Maimonides strongly

⁷⁷ *Guide* III, 51 (*Dalāla*, p. 454; Pines, p. 618).

⁷⁸ *Guide* III, 51 (*Dalāla*, pp. 462-463; Pines, pp. 627-8).

⁷⁹ Cf. Pines, "Translator's Introduction," p. ciii.

⁸⁰ See above, *apud* note 53.

believed in the constant, immovable state of the souls who have reached immortality. According to him, the possibility of change is a property of this world alone, and the point reached at death is incorrigible.⁸¹ But in other respects he seems to have been influenced greatly by Avicenna's psychology and metaphysics.⁸² Shlomo Pines has suggested that Maimonides' discussion of "rational worship" in *Guide* III 51 is reminiscent of Avicenna's concept of spiritual prayer.⁸³ Indeed, Avicenna's influence on Maimonides is evident in this chapter, especially in Maimonides' insistence on the love (*ʿiṣq*) which the perfect individual feels towards the object of contemplation and which fills him with joy.⁸⁴

As we have seen, the Medieval philosophers' abstract, spiritual and intellectual concept of the hereafter caused people, both then and in the modern period, to doubt the sincerity of the philosophers' belief in paradise. In the case of Maimonides, this doubt has become particularly acute since the studies of the late Shlomo Pines, who suggested that Maimonides (following al-Fārābī and perhaps Ibn Bājjā) did not believe in the possibility for humans to achieve metaphysical knowledge. According to Pines, these philosophers set for themselves the traditional goal of apprehending the separate intellects, but did not believe that this goal was attainable by humans. As a result, the highest attainable human perfection according to them was only civic and political happiness. In such a view, naturally, other-worldly happiness is non-existent, and indeed al-Fārābī is said to have expressed the opinion that the belief in the soul's immortality and the hereafter is nothing but myths, "old wives tales."⁸⁵ Pines examined Maimonides' writings closely, and came to the conclusion that "the only passage in the *Guide* which contains an apparently unambiguous affirmation of the survival of the intellect occurs at the end of III 51."⁸⁶ Pines's view has been strongly criticized by Herbert Davidson, who has attempted to show that Maimonides, like his two Muslim predecessors, "recognized the possibility of human thought with the active intellect itself as a permanent object, and he suggests that when the human intellect achieves such thought, it enters a state of permanent conjunction with the active intellect."⁸⁷

Concerning the same passage in *Guide* III 51, Davidson concedes that its

⁸¹ *Commentary on the Mishna*, Avot IV:22, pp. 448-449.

⁸² H. Davidson, "Maimonides on Metaphysical Knowledge," *Maimonidean Studies* 3 (1992/3), pp. 49-103, esp. p. 89.

⁸³ Pines, "Translator's Introduction," p. cii; cf. *Risālat al-ṣalāt*, in *Jāmiʿ al-badāʿi*, pp. 2-14.

⁸⁴ On the Sufi context of this term in Maimonides's usage, see Keller, "Die Religion der Gebildeten," p. 49.

⁸⁵ Pines, "The Limitations of Human Knowledge."

⁸⁶ *Dalāla*, p. 463 (Pines, p. 628); Pines, "The Limitations of Human Knowledge," p. 95. On this chapter, see also Keller, "Die Religion der Gebildeten," pp. 48-49.

⁸⁷ Davidson, "Maimonides on Metaphysical Knowledge," p. 98.

language “falls short of technical precision” but believes that it suggests a final conjunction with the incorporeal realm.

It seems to me that it is precisely the lack of “technical precision” which discloses Maimonides’ sincere belief in the bliss of the hereafter. Despite his insistence on the human inability to grasp this bliss or express it, Maimonides dwelves in this passage into untypical poetic descriptions.⁸⁸ Such descriptions are quite usual in the writings of Avicenna, but are rather rare in Maimonides’ more sober rhetoric. In comparison, we may take Maimonides’ treatment of the resurrection of the dead: when he had his choice, he said the absolute minimum about it, and when forced to elaborate, rather than discuss the question systematically he resorted to polemics and exegesis, which allowed him to divert the discussion. At no point in his discussion of the resurrection does one get the impression that the declared awaited resurrection aroused profound emotions in Maimonides. In sharp contrast to his lukewarm, pursed-lipped admittance of the resurrection, his description of the bliss of the perfect souls rings with the exultation and rupture of the believer.

The goal which the philosophers set for themselves—apprehending the highest truth as a precondition to immortality—was an immensely daunting one. The examination of philosophical texts and rationalist analysis led the philosophers to adhere to this theory, and they usually displayed confidence in their intellectual ability. Nevertheless, it is only natural that they would at times loose heart and lapse into scepticism. Their observation and analysis indicated to them that the attachment of the human intellect to the body was not a mere temporal obstacle, but a constant which defines humanity. Their statements about the possibility of immortality, therefore, vary in intensity, and sometimes even in content. It would be incorrect, in my view, to weigh these statements against each other and look for the single true belief, as opposed to the others which would be only a camouflage. In such cases as Maimonides’ *Guide* III 51 or Avicenna’s *Iṣārā*, where the philosopher abandons technical language to expand on his perception of the hereafter, the emotional language is a clear sign that what the philosopher says reflects exactly what he thinks, regardless of what he may have said before or after. It is a sincere expression of his confidence in the awaiting felicity.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ A similar expansion can be seen in Maimonides’ Introduction to the *Guide*, where he describes the understanding of the perfect man as constant light.

⁸⁹ An earlier version of this paper was read at the first Jerusalem Encounter on Religion and Culture, held at Mishkenot Sha’ananim on April 1997. I wish to thank Moshe Idel, the convener of the encounter, as well as the other participants, for their valuable remarks.

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ABSTRACT

The attitude of Muslim and Jewish medieval philosophers to paradise was determined by their religious traditions as well as by their rationalistic philosophical approach. The present article examines the way in which medieval philosophers of the Islamic world handled this philosophic and religious heritage. In particular, it focuses on Avicenna and Maimonides, who represent, among Muslim and Jewish *falasifa* respectively, the first explicit and sustained attempts to translate the religious traditions on paradise into philosophical language. The article presents their interpretations of the notion of paradise, and attempt to show that, within the boundaries of their common philosophical outlook, their differing religious traditions dictated different nuances of attitude.